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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/30/2017

TAGS: PTER PGOV PHUM PREL CASC FR VE CO

SUBJECT: GOC RECOVERS PROOF OF LIFE FOR SIXTEEN HOSTAGES
FROM FARC

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(U) SUMMARY: The GOC detained three FARC militia on November 29, recovering proof of life for sixteen FARC hostages including Ingrid Betancourt and the three American hostages. President Uribe said the GOC has made the proof of life available to the media and families of the hostages for immediate review; Post received copies of the materials from the GOC at 1500 on November 30 and will forward them to the Department. Family members thanked Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Senator Piedad Cordoba, believing their efforts led to the recovery of the videos. END SUMMARY.

2.(C) President Uribe told the Group of 24 representatives meeting in Bogota on November 30 that the GOC had recovered proof of life videos--as well as some hostage letters--from three FARC militia members detained the night before in Bogota. Uribe noted that Colombian security forces had turned the video and letters over to the Prosecutor General's Office (Fiscalia) which has made the materials available to the media and hostages' relatives. He also said the GOC would provide the GOF and USG with copies of the videos and letters. Post obtained copies of all of the materials, including letters addressed to President Chavez, from the Fiscalia at 1500 on November 30 and is forwarding them to the Department. Fiscalia officials cautioned that giving us the letters not directly related to the U.S. hostages contravenes Colombian privacy laws, and urged us to keep them close hold. There is no legal issue regarding the videos.

3.(U) Uribe said the GOC had earlier called on the FARC to unilaterally release proof of life, as well as the hostages, but believed the FARC would not do so directly to the GOC. If the FARC provided these materials to French President Sarkozy or Venezuelan President Chavez, the GOC would welcome such a move. Uribe added that the GOC would provide legal benefits, such as suspended sentences or reduced jail time under the Justice and Peace Law, to any FARC members who freed the hostages. He said that besides the 45 FARC hostages included in humanitarian exchange talks, there are an additional 750 Colombians who have been kidnapped by the FARC in recent years and whose fates remain unknown. Uribe reiterated the GOC commitment to work with the GOF on mechanisms to obtain release of the hostages as long as these mechanisms do not give political space to the FARC.

4.(U) The release of the proof of life videos has given the family members of the hostages renewed hope. Many publicly thanked President Chavez for his role in the humanitarian exchange talks and urged him to continue his efforts. In a BBC interview, Ingrid Betancourt's sister voiced her gratitude to Cordoba and Chavez for their negotiation efforts, claiming that these led to the recovery of the proof of life videos. Cordoba said the proof of life videos resulted directly from Chavez' facilitation efforts.

5.(U) The GOC obtained five videos and seven letters demonstrating proof of life for Ingrid Betancourt, the three US contractors, ex-Senator Luis Eladio Perez, and eleven members of the Colombian security forces. Four of the five videos date October 23 and 24, 2007 and the fifth is dated January 1, 2007. Still, a Colombian military official refers to October 23 in the video dated January 1, suggesting the video also dates from October. The GOC obtained the proof of life information after Colombian security forces arrested three FARC members during a military operation in Bogota. Peace Commissioner Luis Carlos Restrepo called the DCM following the arrests late on November 29 to convey the news. The GOC also issued a communique shortly after midnight informing the public of the proof of life and listing the individuals shown in the videos. Restrepo said, "the GOC has no additional knowledge of the whereabouts of the hostages, and is reviewing the information obtained to determine any additional information."

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